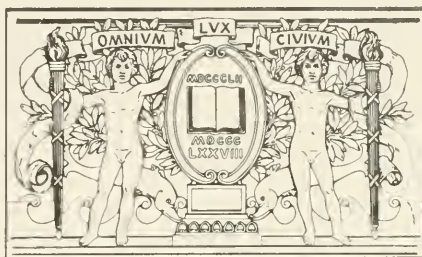


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Beacon Will
and the
Carol Singers

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Beacon Hill
and the
Carol Singers

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1923

Beacon Hill and the Carol Singers

BY
JOHN R. SHULTZ



BOSTON
THE WOOD, CLARKE PRESS
1923



*"Churches from whose depths come
shafts of light"*

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MUSIC

Beacon Hill and the Carol Singers

*"As one small candle may light
a thousand, so the light here kindled
hath shone to many,—yea, in some
sort to our whole nation."*

—Bradford's History.



IN THE year of our Lord sixteen hundred and seventy there was passed in the Massachusetts Colony an Act forbidding the observance of the "Festival of Christmas and kindred ones superstitiously kept:"

"For preventing disorders arising in several places within this jurisdiction, by reason of some still observing such festivals, as were superstitiously kept in other countries, to the great dishonor of God and offense of others:

"It is therefore ordered by this Court and the Authority thereof, that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing labor, feasting, or any other way upon such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offense five shillings as a fine to the Country."

For the early settlers did not observe—at least, openly—the traditional customs of their fathers and feast and make merry at this season. The passing of this Act was

the culmination of the hostility of the Puritans against the observance of the anniversary of the birth of our Saviour, they denying the propriety of celebrating Christmas as a day of thanksgiving and rejoicing.

But Time has played a loving jest upon these iron-hearted ancestors of ours. Despite the Act and the Puritans' fierce assaults, the splendid celebration of Christmas, suppressed for two long centuries, was again accorded recognition in 1856, when it was proclaimed a legal holiday in Massachusetts. Happily for us the traditional custom of our English ancestors to celebrate the festival by feasting and merry-making has been generally revived.

*"At Christmas play and make good cheer
For Christmas comes but once a year."*

Tusser, Sixteenth Century.

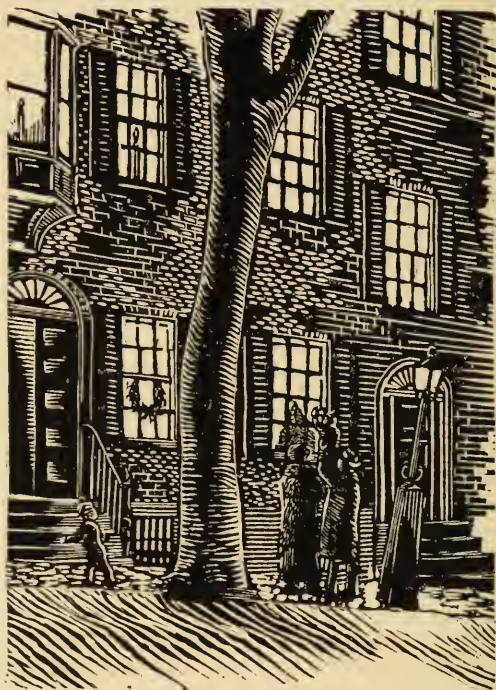
Boston, in particular, as though to make amends for its tardy recognition, has welcomed back, with open-armed hospitality, the once-outlawed Christmas. Maintaining contact with its past, that is like romance, through jealously preserved memorials, notable associations, and memories of great men and women, and great deeds, the old city is an appropriate setting for the celebration of the venerable festival.

For Boston is an old city, as age goes in our youthful land, its more distant history blending with the soft twilight of three centuries ago, when its settlers closely followed the Pilgrims. Colonists from Endicott's company at Salem, and later arrivals under the lead of John Winthrop, located first at Charlestown in 1630, where they suffered greatly from the lack of fresh water. Seeing their plight, William Blackstone, the first white settler of Boston, "came and acquainted the governor of an excellent spring there, withal inviting him and soliciting him thither"—an invitation that was gladly accepted.

The Court of Assistants, sitting in the "Governor's House in Charlestown, September 17 (7 o. s.) passed an order 'that Trimountane shall be called Boston'—the name of the old English home of the chief men of the company." "Trimountane," the name given by Endicott's colonists and known to the Indians as "Shaw-mutt," was then a peninsula with three hills. On the summit of the main peak a beacon was set up, from whence came the name Beacon Hill.

On the western slope lived the hermit Blackstone, who settled here about 1625, a kindly, hospitable, scholarly soul—the first of the long list of bookish folk, thinkers, dreamers, and artists of their various sorts, to find the hill a congenial haunt.

Stretching away from the southern slope of the hill is the Common, most unique and democratic of public grounds. Broad malls and paths, shaded by tall, over-arching trees, traverse the pleasant expanse in all directions—a maze to the uninitiated. We tread paths once familiar to men whose names grace the annals of letters, arts, science, and statesmanship. Old records inform us that "In or about the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred thirty and four, the then present inhabitants of said Town of Boston, of whom the Honorable John Winthrop, Esquire, Governor of the Colony was chiefe, did treat and agree with Mr. William Blackstone for the purchase of his Estate and rights in any lands lying within said neck of Land called Boston, after which purchase the Town laid out a plan for a trayning field which ever since and now is used for that purpose and for the feeding of cattell." The law of 1640 declared that "there shall be no land granted either for houseplott or garden, out of the open ground or common field." Before Bostonians would tolerate the destruction of this sacred preserve, the hill itself shall have crumbled away.



"Picturesque, livable, old houses"



EMINISCENT of the Boston of yesteryear, Beacon Hill is a delightfully fitting spot for the observance of Old Christmas. Like a background, rich as a bit of old tapestry, is its heritage of traditions, customs and ideals. Here we may turn back the pages of Time, picking up bits of quaint lore, old legends, half-forgotten history and romance.

A haunting charm about the hill, impossible to define, a subtle lure, intrigues our interest. Memories blend strangely and yet harmoniously with the conveniences and blessings of modern life. Lowell happily says, it has:

"That exquisite something called style, which like the grade of perfect breeding, everywhere pervasive and nowhere emphatic, makes itself felt by the skill with which it effaces itself, and masters us at last with a sense of indefinable completeness."

The dignified beauty, mellow refinement, and air of comfort are felt by all who come to the hill. A sense of everything well placed, well tended, and presenting an indescribable air of breeding and quality is sensed rather than perceived.

Basking in this atmosphere of bygone days, Beacon Hill has placidly continued to resist dissolution through its innate conservatism—a barrier intangible, but effective. Old customs and traditions hold the line and keep unceasing watch upon the stately memorials clustered about this sacred eminence.

Even that section which has somewhat descended from its high estate, and been given over to rooms and flats to all sorts and conditions of men, is again coming

into its own after a period of social obscurity. Carefully, even reverently, the fine old houses are being restored.

The houses on the hill are of dignified, old-fashioned proportions, reminiscent of days when men built for taste and enduring beauty of line as well as for shelter. Mostly of red brick, they have been enriched and warmed by time into tones like the bloom of perfect ripeness. Old white doors, with here and there a fine dull black one, of beautiful lines and lovely details; side and fan lights, delicately, indeed exquisitely, wrought; ancient polished brass knockers and handles which entice the curious; tall, hammered iron newels or lamp posts of chaste design and graceful flowing lines—all are carefully preserved, producing a subtle suggestion of old-time delicacy. Clinging to everything is that wondrous, that delicious, air of antiquity, eloquent of the gracious, unhurried time, of the good labor and craft of old days.

Parts of Beacon Hill are like transplanted bits of residential London. Isn't it delightfully fitting that here is located Louisburg Square—that precise, very English, little quadrangle—which retains more of the atmosphere and customs of an aristocratic past than any other single area of the town. Secluded, almost cloistral, this spot is so distinctive, so irreproachably correct as to arrest the instant attention of any visitor.

Not the least of the hill's charms are the tangled, crooked streets, but being crooked and at cross purposes, they bewilder the stranger not a little. Blithely a street bends from its previous course, or quickly turns a corner as though running away from us and daring us to follow; old mysterious ways of irresistible charm lure us—and we thrill to the spirit of high adventure.

The character of each of these streets is individual rather than collective. Beacon, Chestnut and Mt. Vernon streets are stately thoroughfares where picturesque, liv-

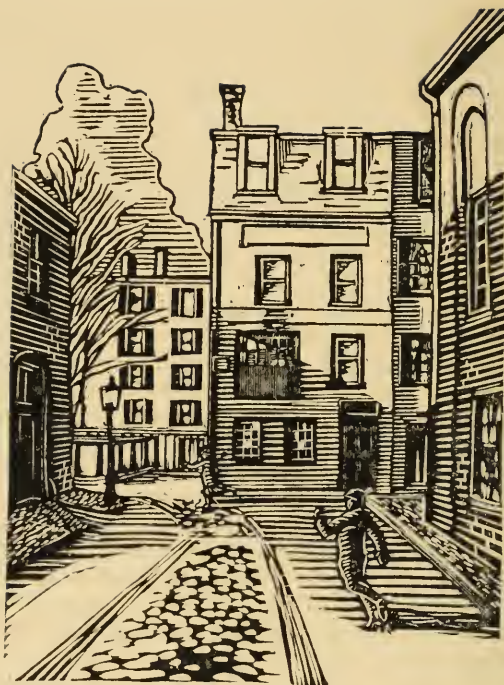
able old houses dream serenely under majestic trees. But most of the streets are small, yet all are neatly groomed and quietly distinctive.

As we ramble over and around this hill, so fascinating in contour and legend, we are captivated by an interesting and beautiful skyline of graceful towers, domes, and steeples, roofs, dormers, and chimneys etched in sharp outline against the sky; inspiring vistas; glimpses of crooked, climbing, narrow ways; odd little streets rimmed by garden walls on one side and by old brick houses on the other; old trees; old doorways; rows and rows of red brick, ivy-covered houses that swell into pleasant lines. Behind the rows of stately old houses we peep through latticed gates into yards surrounded by venerable, high brick walls, concealing ghostly remains of old gardens.

We discover droll, little out-of-way courts or squares—almost none of them anywhere near square—that we would like to pick up and hug for being so tiny and red and white and green and quiet. We fancy they ran there when young, playing at hide-and-seek, and have forgotten the way out.

Brooding gray-white over the scene is the State House, a gem of colonial architecture by Bulfinch. Years ago the dome was covered with copper plates rolled by that immortal patriot and master craftsman—Paul Revere. Today, like a beacon, its gold dome shines forth in a sea of sky.

The hill is a place of pastel colors, of richness, mellowness and subtlety of blending. Houses of rose-colored brick, age-tinted roofs of variegated slate or verde copper, fresh white paint, well polished brasses, sparkling windows—some of old purple or violet glass, curtains of white or rich colors, gay flower-pots—form a veritable pageant of color.



"Droll, little out-of-way courts"



ON Christmas Eve, Beacon Hill blossoms forth into a gorgeous mixture of light and color, music and hospitality. The dear old hill can boast no lovelier sight—the weaving and twining of green garlands; the sprigs of mistletoe and wreaths of holly and laurel at the windows and on the old doors; the poinsettias on window-sills; the evergreens in window-boxes and on door steps. Through golden-lighted windows, like white-framed pictures, we see Christmas trees brave in the splendor of green and gifts, goodies and glory; or the spirit of the old world in a Star, a Madonna, or the Holy Child.

Windows fairly blaze with tier upon tier of tapering points of light—clear green bayberry dips, wax tapers, and tall tallow candles—that glow with beauty and soft changing radiance. Like tiny jewels that add a touch of fairy-land, they shine serenely forth, extending a wordless welcome to the approaching wanderer, or casting a ray of Christmas cheer across his path.

Overhead the sky is vast and deep; a full, crystal moon showers everything with white radiance; or stars float, cold and white and glittering. Trees, robed in ermine or decked with jewels of alabaster and crystal, gleam in the light of the frost moon like prisms of beauty.

From chimney pots spirals the smoke; on window-panes are fairy frostings; street lamps weave weird patterns of light and shadow; over everything a blanket of snow, silver and shadow in the moonlight—a picture of rarest beauty.

Sheltered within cosy homes happy laughter sounds; fireplaces send out their cheerful glow; footfalls of trav-

elers sound softly along the streets; sleigh bells jingle—all add to the delicious mystery of the night before Christmas.

As the lights begin to twinkle, time and space vanish before enthralling romance. Enchantment and charm go hand in hand. Another world persists, a world without barriers of time or distance. We have left the earth behind and are in a realm half-real, half touched by fancy and radiantly beautiful.

Through the fabric of the night runs a golden thread. Perhaps it is the whimsy of a child, or the stuff that dreams are made of, but it touches the heart strings of the immortal child in all of us. Perhaps it is our wistful groping for dreams lost in the routine of daily common-places. Under the spell of the night and the witchery of these few hours, we are lifted out of ourselves.

Everywhere is proclaimed the spirit of Merry Christmas in a carnival of bright-eyed frolic and warm-hearted hospitality. Inspiring it is to see such gayety and delight amidst the chill and gloom of winter. A quaintness, too, is mingled with the revelry that echoes back the joyousness of other days and makes Christmas a richer and lovelier festival.

In celebration of this most loveable festival we make holiday with song and ceremony of many centuries and many lands. All hearken back to the folklore of a simple, kindly people, the rich vividness of whose ritual kept alive their youth. We have retained the charm of the old while adopting the best of the new.

Interesting references to the origin of Beacon Hill's Christmas celebration are made in a quaint old book once kept by E. A. Matson, one-time organist and choirmaster of the Church of the Advent:

"1859. On Christmas Eve the boys sang, at * * * several Christmas carols.

"1861. After service the choir went out caroling as usual."

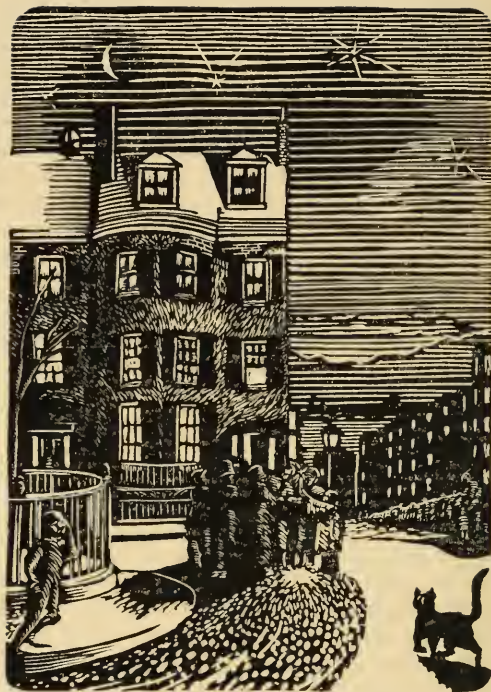
In 1862 he again alludes to the occasion.

From "Memoirs and Letters of Frederick Dan Huntington," a passage of a letter dated Christmas Day, 1859, reads:

"After the house had become still, about half-past ten o'clock as I was sitting in the study, preparing for the holy duties of today, suddenly most delightful music, in youthful voices, broke out under my window. I raised the curtain, and there stood a picturesque group of singers, mostly young boys muffled in cloaks and shawls, with lanterns, under the sparkling stars in the frosty night air, pouring out Christmas carols—genuine old English carols—in music and words wholly peculiar, and beautiful exceedingly. At first I was puzzled to make them out. I noticed that whenever they spoke the name of Jesus they bowed the head. Altogether the effect was remarkable—as if I had been transported back into the ages of old romance and faith. On going out to ask the strangers in they greeted me with a 'Happy Christmas.' It was an old-world custom for these companies called 'Waits,' to carol in this way, on Nativity night, under the rector's window. You know the pathetic and moving character of the music-voices of boys. This formed a charming conclusion to the day. It was as if something from Bethlehem and Fatherland had blended graciously, and floated down through the starlight and frosty air to our door."

How long the practice of carol singing was maintained is obscure, but it lapsed sometime during the civil war, or in the remaining period of the nineteenth century.

Revived less than a score of years ago the custom bids fair to endure permanently—a symbol of spiritual thought, far bigger and broader than any sect or creed, it



"Louisburg Square, secluded, almost cloistral"

appeals to all. The heart that does not throb with a love for it is a sad or an untouched one.

Tonight small groups gather, and wending their way through the maze of devious ways, sing or play the gay Christmas tunes outside the houses of friends, underneath the frosty stars like the Waits or village musicians of old. The delightfully twisting, crooked streets seem peopled with strolling imagery—linked with the cobwebby past, and withal suited to the time and place.

Guided by trumpeters and choir boys carrying tall torches, just as the faithful of old followed the Star of Bethlehem, bands of carolers follow, singing "Silent Night, Holy Night," "Little Town of Bethlehem," "God Rest you Merrie, Gentlemen," "Adeste Fideles," and sturdy carol psalms which tell the Christmas message in sweet melodies and quaint words—rare and lovely echoes of medieval Christianity—immortal, because they were born of a supreme faith and a happy heart.

Longer and larger grows the procession as the singers pass slowly from street to street. We stop at the open houses of those who follow the ancient custom of "welcoming the stranger in our midst."

A gracious greeting awaits us. The hospitable doors stand wide, a subtle reflection of the happy lives of those who dwell therein. Refreshments are served from priceless heirlooms—wonderful old beaten silver, chaste in design and gleaming dully; lovely china and glass of odd and curious pattern; hand-made linen—to touch these is to touch hands across the centuries.

For those to whom the season means shrines and candles, the sonorous beauty of organ tones, and jubilation of choir, there are churches from whose depths come shafts of light, fragrance of Christmas greens and incense that recalls the gold and frankincense and myrrh brought by the Wise Men.

Extremely tender and inspiring are the services of the church at this season. What grander music than the full choir and the pealing organ performing a Christmas anthem?

It is midnight, Hark! On the frosty air, church bells peal out "Peace on earth, good will to men!" A great wave of joy surges over the earth as on that night when from out a sky remote and dark and old, the Message came.

*There are sounds in the sky when the year
grows old,
And the winds of the winter blow,
When night and the moon are clear and cold,
And the stars shine on the snow,
Or wild is the blast and the bitter sleet
That beats on the window-pane:
But blest on the frosty hills are the feet
Of the Christmas Child again!*



C, This is a copy of the first edition of *Beacon Hill and the Carol Singers*, printed at Boston in 1923. Composition and presswork by James Garfield Clarke. The illustrations were drawn and engraved on wood by Thacher Nelson.



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